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Charlotte Spivack, Roberta Lynne Staples. *The Company of Camelot: Arthurian Characters in Romance and Fantasy.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994. xiii + 161 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-313-27981-2.

Reviewed by Randi Eldevik

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An increased emphasis on complex characterization is one feature that differentiates modern from medieval narrative; so it seems fitting that a study of twentieth-century developments in Arthurian fiction should emphasize the various ways in which novelists have treated the well-known characters of Merlin, Morgan le Fay, Sir Kay, Gawain, Guine- vere, Lancelot, Mordred, and of course Arthur himself. Spivack and Staples devote a chapter apiece to each of these characters, in the order given. Within each chapter, discussion ranges among a miscellany of twentieth-century authors, from distinguished men of letters such as C.S. Lewis and T.H. White to some mere hacks who have recently found a source of profit in Arthuriana.

The recent burgeoning of Arthurian fiction is a phenomenon worth looking into; but one could wish that Spivack and Staples had looked into it with a more critical gaze. There is something strange about juxtaposing a great work such as White's *Once and Future King* with an obscure piece of juvenile fiction such as *The Winter of Magic's Return* by one Pamela Service, and discussing them with equal solemnity and earnestness. To criticize is to judge, and Spivack and Staples seldom offer judgments of whether one author's treatment is more suc- cessful or important than another's; they simply report, deadpan, on how all these writers have portrayed the characters of Camelot. Liter- ary criticism, as such, is not often attempted (though sporadic bursts of Jungian analysis--not very illuminating--do appear whenever Spivack and Staples generalize about one of the characters). Infrequent ventures into critical evaluation are led astray by the unrelenting emphasis on characterization: for instance, Spivack and Staples complain (page 132) that T.H. White's characterization of Arthur suffers from the prevalence of ideological concerns in *The Once and Future King*, when the greatness of this work lies in the very fact that it *is* a novel of ideas--and, to boot, a novel of striking characterizations, as Spivack and Staples are forced to acknowledge in other chapters (on Lancelot, Guinevere, et al.).

But perhaps there is implicit critical evaluation in the choice of novels included in this study.

The authors warn that their intent was to make a representative sampling, not a comprehensive survey--a reasonable approach, given the vast proliferation of twentieth-century Arthuriana. So, one assumes, Spivack and Staples chose those books they considered most worthwhile and interesting, regardless of their authors' reputations; and presumably the really worthless potboilers languish unmentioned, in the obscurity they deserve. I am glad to see some works of real merit, which have never received the acclaim they deserved--for example, ***Sword at Sunset*** by Rosemary Sutcliff, who if not quite in Lewis and White's league is much more than a hack--getting their share of the limelight. But since literary cachet is not a concern for Spivack and Staples, and since the most popular of pop entertainment is fair game for such a study as this, why not go the whole hog and include the 1980's DC comic book series ***Camelot 3000*** by Mike W. Barr and Brian Bolland? It contains some fascinating characterizations, and is at least as worthy of serious consideration as some of the novels Spivack and Staples have chosen.

Looking back in the other direction, toward the medieval sources of the Arthurian legends, one finds further reason for disappointment in Spivack and Staples' treatment. It is right that in a book on twentieth- century Arthurian fiction, discussion of the medieval sources should be brief. But this brief discussion ought to be factually accurate, at least; and the numerous inaccuracies in Spivack and Staples' handling of the medieval Arthurian tradition do not inspire confidence. Spivack and Staples state (page 2) that the figure of Guinevere evolved from that of "an adulteress guilty of destroying Camelot" in the earliest chronicles, to a much more admirable figure in later medieval works. Actually, the earliest chronicles mention Guinevere only as a victim of abduction and rape by Mordred--not a willing adulteress, and not at all culpable for the destruction of Camelot. With the high middle ages came the growth of courtly love, which made Guinevere an adulteress, yet admirable. Spivack and Staples also state that Malory's Launcelot has no psychological depth (page 96), which is simply not true. And in a discussion of heroic exaggeration, they state that Beowulf could swim carrying nine suits of armor, whereas the number actually stated in the poem is thirty; a minor point, but indicative of the authors' shaky grasp of literary history.

Even on their home ground of the twentieth century, inaccuracies occur. The bibliography is inconsistent in handling Arthurian novels, sometimes citing first editions (e.g. the 1939 ***Sword in the Stone***) but in other cases the most recent edition: ***The Once and Future King*** is listed under a 1986 edition, which could lead novice readers to think that White's magnum opus never appeared until that year! Admittedly, it is sometimes helpful to learn about recent editions of old books; I was not aware that Tor Books had done a paperback reissue of Sutcliff's ***Sword at Sunset*** till I saw it here. But it is unfortunate that, just above this entry, the entry for the hardcover first edition of ***Sword at Sunset*** is dated 1983--a mistake for 1963 which could give the wrong impression to readers unfamiliar with Sutcliff's career. She must be seen as a pioneer rather than a parvenu in Arthurian fiction.

The bibliography is also deficient where secondary criticism is concerned. The discussion on page 91 includes a quotation by the scholar Robert Kellogg, but one finds no further information on Kellogg listed in back. Puzzling in another way is the complete absence, from both discussion and bibliography, of Jennifer Goodman's fine 1988 study ***The Legend of Arthur in British and American Literature***.

Of the numerous writing errors which one would not expect from two authors who are both English professors, I shall mention only the most egregious: the repeated use of the word "revision" as a verb (e.g., page 7, "Arthur too has been revisioned in modern fiction," and page 10, "popular mythic characters who have been revisioned").

Did they mean "revised" or "re-envisioned"? It is hard to tell.

Focusing on the post-medieval characterization of Arthurian heroes, heroines, and antagonists is an interesting idea per se. I wish I could say that I came away from this book with enhanced insight into these much-loved characters; but I did not. This fascinating topic has not yet received the treatment it deserves.

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